

Sri Aurobindo on Sanskrit (the extract)

“Law and process must have governed the origins and developments of language. Given the necessary clue and sufficient data, they must be discoverable. It seems to me that in the Sanskrit language the clue can be found, the data lie ready for investigation.” (The Secret of the Veda, p.47)

Sri Aurobindo gives us a key to study the language from a different point of view. He started his investigation in his work “The Origins of Aryan Speech” and did not finish it. But he gave us the principles and the direction for farther studies: **“... we can find an equal regularity , an equal reign of fixed process on the psychological side, in the determining of the relation of particular sense to particular sound.”**

The four first simple vowels *a, i, u, r* of Sanskrit language **“indicate the idea of being, existence... A in its short form indicates being in its simplicity without any farther idea of modification or quality, mere or initial being, creative of space; i an intense state of existence, being narrowed , forceful and insistent, tending to a goal, seeking to occupy space; u a wide, extended but not diffused state of existence, being medial and firmly occupant of space; r a vibrant state of existence, pulsing in space, being active about a point, within a limit.”** (Sri Aurobindo, Archives and Research, December 1978, v.2, No 2, pp. 155-156)

Similarly a simple sound *a* was seen by Vedantic and Tantric traditions as ever-lasting sound-basis for all other sounds which were considered to be only its different modifications. These modifications became, so to say, an “Alphabet”, not in an abstract way as it happened with Western Alphabets, which followed the occult traditions of the Middle East and took unconsciously the very order of an occult significance of the Mystery of Creation already unknown to them, but as a logic variations of consciously articulated different modes of the Meaning of One.

Thus the sound *a* was representing for them the very basis, pronounced without any special articulation. Psychologically it could be seen as a substance of speech, which all other sounds were derived from with a help of articulation. So, being modified by the means of articulation this very sound, symbolically "a", signifying “existence as it is”, could carry other meanings, as for instance: “intense state of existence” (sound *i*) or “extended state of existence” (sound *u*) or “vibrant state of existence” (sound *r*) and so on. Psychologically one could perceive this process as an attempt to articulate a specific sense-meaning through the given (determined) apparatus of articulation.

If apparatus would be different (non-human) than the sounds also would be different, in other words, *sounds are only representatives* of a specific articulation or better to say *of a living and conscious attempt to articulate a specific meaning*. Therefore we could say that not the sounds, which are really important, but the conscious effort to articulate a particular meaning, and because of its correspondence with outer means (human apparatus of speech) which are fixed, the significance of the sound-values must also be fixed, and therefore can be systematised and studied.

Sanskrit Language is the language, which has preserved its own original and complete system of etymons, simple sound-ideas, roots. Therefore it does not require any other language to explain its own derivations, for it has all the evidence in its own basic system, and refers only to it. This system is based on the interrelation of the meaning with the sound.

“The Rishis’ use of language was governed by this ancient psychology of the Word. When in English we use the word “wolf” or “cow”, we mean by it simply the animal designated; we are not conscious of any reason why we should use that particular sound for the idea except the immemorial custom of the language; and we cannot use it for any other sense or purpose except by an artificial device of style. But for the Vedic Rishi *vṛka* meant the tearer and, therefore among other applications of the sense, a wolf; *dhenu* meant the fosterer, nourisher, and therefore a cow. But the original and general predominates, the derived and particular is secondary.” (Secret of the Veda. p.51-52).

The difference between the etymological and contextual or conventional meaning has to be mentioned here.

The word *vṛka-* is derived from the root *vṛj*, or as some propose from *vraśc*, to tear, to break asunder, which is a member of a simple *vṛ-*root family. So to really grasp the etymological meaning of the root *vṛ-* one has to become aware of the significance of simple *u* and *r*. Moreover about their significance in all other roots. That is what we mean when we speak about the system of etymons, which can be clearly perceived only in their completeness.

Sri Aurobindo writes in his article “Philological Method of the Veda”: “**The Vedic Sanskrit ... abounds in a variety of forms and inflexions; it is fluid and vague, yet richly subtle in its use of cases and tenses. And on its psychological side it has not yet crystallized, is not entirely hardened into the rigid forms of intellectual precision. The word for the Vedic Rishi is still a living thing, a thing of power, creative, formative. It is not yet a conventional symbol for an idea, but itself the parent and former of ideas. It carries within it the memory of its roots, is still conscient of its own history.**” (p.51.)

Introductory overview.

In Sanskrit language varna *a* or *ā* is not available in the root-form, which must be quite natural, for it would have the most different meaning. But there is a big number of roots starting with *a-varna* and ending with consonant or a group of consonants. Here we have to discriminate the roots like *avati*, *arcati* etc. as they are only modified by *guṇa* roots *u* and *ṛc*. It is also often used as a prefix in many grammatical applications with nouns and verbs to denote the significance of non-actuality for the meaning of word in certain time or space. While the *ā* is often used to proximate the actuality of the meaning of a noun or a verb till certain point in space, time, quality or otherwise. When *a* or *ā* are not initial then they have the least influence on the significance of the previous varna. We can compare it with a white color, when we paint on the white than we don't see its influence, but when we paint with white on other colors we see it clearly.

The root *i* is available in Sanskrit with its big family of roots and derivations. In grammatical applications the varna *i* gives the significance of actuality to the meaning of the word in time, space, quality, etc., like for instance in words: *itah*, from here, *iti*, in this way; *idā*, now; *iyat*, this much; *iha*, here; etc. This varna *i* etymologically could have a *guṇa*-meaning of being in utmost concentrated movement towards the point, ” *an intense state of existence, being narrowed, forceful and insistent, tending to a goal, seeking to occupy space*”.

The Monier Williams Dictionary gives such significances of the root *i*: to go, walk; to flow; to advance, spread, get about; to go to or towards; to go away; to rise from, to come forth; etc. It is also worthwhile to see some other roots starting with this varna, which we can consider as members of its family (extended with various consonants, which sometimes give an additional connotation), as for instance:

ikh, to go, move;

iñkh, to go, move;

iñg, to go, to go to or towards, to move, agitate, shake;

*icch*ṅiṣ, to desire, to endeavor to obtain;

iṭ, to go, to go to or towards, to make haste;

inakṣ, to endeavour to reach, strive to obtain;

indh, kindling, lighting, flaming;

inv, to advance upon, press upon, drive;

ir, to go;

iṣ, to course to move, throw, to stream out, to promote; etc.

The relation between two varnas *a* and *i* is very interesting. *ā* indicates a farther plane when initial and *i* indicates a near one (cp.: *idam*, this, *adas*, that. etc.). In many grammatical applications *i*-varna is a substitute for *a*-varna, as it was considered to be a weak form of *a*-varna, so to say, the essence of *a*. Thus, in some roots even *ā*-varna can be substituted by its weak form - *i* or *ī*. For instance in passive forms: *mā* gives *mi-ta-*, *mīyate*; *pā* - *pī-ta-*, *pīyate*; *dhā* - *hi-ta-*, *dhīyate* etc.

The root *u* is available, and in grammatical usage this varna conveys the significance of a space, a space between the two points, and therefore of a duality, the relation between subject and object. Like, for instance: the duality of many different words: *devaḥ*, m., N., a god, - *devau*, two gods; *nadī*, f., N., a river, - *nadyau*, two rivers; *mātā*, a mother, - *mātarau*, two mothers; *marut*, m. a wind, - *marutau*, two winds, etc.,

(cp. also: ubhau, both; tyam (second person), thau; yuvām, you two; yūyam, you; dya-, two; etc.) The prefix ud-, “to take up from down”, and thus to open or to create a space between up and down, the particle or prefix upa- “near”, “by a side”, “together with”, etc. In other words it brings a connotation of a particular space, which includes at least two objects, necessary to define it, and therefore of an intense substantial space: “*a wide, extended but not diffused state of existence, being medial and firmly occupant of space*”.

Here we list only main roots and their significance given in the Dictionary to trace the meaning of varna u:

u, to call to, to roar;

u. av, to drive (as a car or a horse), to promote; to satisfy, favour; to be pleased with, like; to protect, defend, govern;

ukh, to be strong; to throw out, to scatter (as sparks); to sprinkle;

uc, to take pleasure in, be fond of; to fit;

ucch. vas, to shine;

ūch, to gather;

ud, to spring as water; to bathe; (udan-, udaka-, uda-, a water);

ubj, to press down, to subdue;

ubh, to cover over, to fill with;

uru-, broad, wide, extended;

us, to burn, (usa-, early morning, a dawn; usman-, a heat);

ūti-, help, protection, enjoyment;

ūma-, helper, companion;

ūy, to weave, sew;

ūrnu, to cover, hide;

ūh, to move, push, remove, change; to observe, to mark, to hope, to attend to; etc.

And also the verbs starting with va-, for in the weak forms they will change into u-/ū-, these are:

vac, uc, to say, tell;

vad, ud, to speak;

vas, us, to inhabit, dwell in; to shine; to clothe oneself;

vah, uh, to carry, to convey; to blow (as wind), to bear along (water, said of rivers); etc.

Some roots from the *r* family:

r, to move;

rc, to shine, to praise;

ri, to be strong and firm;

rñj, to make straight or right;

rdh, to grow, to succeed; etc.

And others, where it is not initial and also in its long form:

kr, to make, to arrange, to do, (to split into parts and to put them in order);

krt, to cut;

gṛ, to call, recite, swallow;

tṛ, to overcome, to pass over;

dṛ, to tear, to break asunder;

mṛ, to die;

vr, to choose, to cover; etc.

The most obvious qualities of these main four varnas *a, i, u, r* (*r* and *l* were considered by Pāṇini to be of the same quality, here we cannot discuss this matter) will become more clear when we examine them in the roots where they interact with each other:

yā, (i+ā), to go, to move;

vā, (u+ā), to blow, (from here: *vāta-*, *vāyu-*, a wind);

rā, (r+ā), to impart, give;

lā, (r/l+ā), to impart, to take;

yū, (i+u), to unite, to split;

i, to go;

vi, (u+i), *part.* or *pref.* : apart, asunder, between, through, etc.;

vī, (u+i), to go, to approach (either as a friend, i.e. ‘seek or take eagerly, grasp, seize, accept, visit, enjoy’, or as an enemy, i.e. ‘fall upon, attack, assail, visit, punish, avenge’);

vṛ, (u+r), to cover, veil, hide; to prevent from; to exclude; to choose, select;

ri, rī, (r+i, i), to release, to detach from;

ru, (r+u) to roar, to cry aloud; to break to pieces; to be angry.

Here we took the most obvious samples: *yu, yā, rā, ri, ru, vā, vi, vṛ*, covering all possible combinations between simple vowels, which together with *i, r, u* have their huge families of derivations.

The root *yū* is the best sample to grasp the significance of both *i* and *u* varnas. Its contextual meaning is *to unite* and *to divide*, but its etymological one is “of two being kept in one”, it can be either a union or division, but for both meanings “oneness” and “diversity” are indispensable. From this root we have many derivations, like: *yuj*, to yoke, join, to apply, to come into union, to attach oneself to, to use, to mix, to fix, etc.; from here we have derivatives like: *yuga-*, a yoke, a pair; *yoga-* the act of uniting with, etc. (around 150 meanings are given in the Dictionary); *yudh*, to fight (two poles are placed in one); *yup*, to debar, obstruct, confuse; etc. So, through these derivatives we can easily grasp something of the sense-quality of simple varnas *i* and *u*.

In the roots *rā, rī, rū* (*to depart, to detach from, to break to pieces*, respectively) the significance of varna *r* gets clearer, it is of *making division, cut, separation*, when applied in a moving context, or in a static context it would have a significance of *radiance and brightness, power and energy*: *ṛc*, to shine; *rai*, a treasure, etc.

The root *vṛ* in its etymological sense can have the meaning of acting in-between the two points as to side with one of them, when the emphasis is falling on the significance of *r*-varṇa (*vṛ*- “to choose”), or by dominating of the significance of the first varṇa *u*, it can give the meaning: “to cover”. And in this last significance we have two derivatives from this root: *varuṇa-* and *vṛtra-*, meaning in first case “a protector”, “All-enveloping Sky”, and in second one “a restrainer”, “an enemy”, and in both the etymological significance of the root *vṛ* is visible.